

Aspects affecting confidence in writing

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Abstract

Confidence is an important factor to take into account when discussing any aspect of language education. It is important for language teachers to be mindful of student confidence as students that are more confident are also more motivated and increased motivation is one factor leading to increased ability. The current study uses questionnaire data from 72 students in addition to information about the writing process and assignments carried out to ascertain which different factors have an impact on student confidence in their writing ability. The factors taken into consideration were: the number of drafts written, the amount of self-feedback, peer feedback and teacher feedback received, ability level, the grade received on the previous assignment and essay length. In general, a positive relationship was shown between more feedback and higher confidence. However, the only variable that was found to have a significant effect on student confidence in their writing ability was the amount of peer feedback. This finding suggests that peer feedback should be regarded as an indispensable part of the writing curriculum.

Introduction

Confidence is an important factor to consider when discussing any aspect of language education. Differences in confidence can have an impact on learners' willingness to communicate and, most importantly, their motivation. Teaching

practices have been found to have an effect on students' confidence in writing and subsequently, a learners' level of confidence can determine their choice of a future career. It seems that if teaching practices can affect confidence and confidence can change high stakes decisions such as career choice then the factors that affect learner confidence are a worthwhile avenue to investigate.

The current study uses questionnaire data in addition to information about the writing process and assignments carried out during the writing course. The purpose of this study is to ascertain which different factors have an impact on student confidence in their writing ability. In particular, the following questions will be addressed: 1) Is students' confidence in their writing ability predicted by the grade they received on the previous paper? 2) Is students' confidence affected by the number of drafts written? 3) Is students' confidence in their writing ability affected by the length of the essay? 4) Is students' confidence in their writing ability affected by the number of times self-review is carried out? 5) Is students' confidence in their writing ability affected by the amount of teacher feedback they receive? 6) Is students' confidence in their writing ability affected by the amount of peer feedback they receive? 7) Is confidence fundamentally tied to personality, meaning that changing our practices has little impact on student confidence? A brief literature review will be followed by a detailed explanation of the design, results and implications of this study.

Review of literature

Research on L1 students' confidence

Researchers of education have reported a positive relationship between self-

confidence and academic achievement. However, it is unclear whether the high self-confidence enables people to achieve or whether high levels of achievement allow people to have higher self-confidence. Bandura (1986) claims that personal beliefs about one's capabilities predict outcomes better than measures of actual capabilities. That is; one is capable of what one thinks one is.

In a study on first language writers, carried out by Pajares and Johnson (1994) students reported that their confidence to carry out certain writing tasks increased and the quality of their writing also improved. On the other hand, no change was reported in their confidence in their composition, grammar, usage or mechanical skills. This shows that, while one may become more confident in their ability to carry out certain tasks, confidence in particular writing skills may increase more slowly.

Feedback and confidence

It has been stated by some that confidence relates highly with corrective feedback given to students on preliminary drafts (Truscott, 1996; Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). These writers have suggested that the more corrective feedback students receive, the lower confidence they will have in their writing ability. Hyland (1998) also found that one of the participants in her study actually changed her career choice based on the feedback she received from her writing instructor. Previously, she had believed she was good at writing, however, the teacher feedback over the duration of the course led her to believe she was not good enough and she consequently changed her major from business (which would require a fair amount of writing) to tourism (which required far less writing).

Learners who have lower writing ability than their peers may develop defences to protect their self-esteem (Cleary; cited in Silver and Lee 2007) and learners with poor self-perception as language learners and with poor proficiency in the language may find teacher feedback less useful than other students (Cohen 1987). A certain level of language proficiency is required to understand feedback, before even having the possibility of taking the next step and revising and improving a piece of writing. If a student can understand all the feedback they receive it seems that the feedback could increase that learners' confidence quite considerably and in addition, could be put to use to result in a better finished product. On the other hand, if a learner cannot even understand the comments they receive it could have a considerable negative affect on the learner's confidence as well as little or no result in terms of an improved written product. Misunderstanding of teachers' feedback seems almost certain to lead to decreased confidence and consequently also decreased motivation.

Hyland (2003) points out that peer response has been claimed by many to be unsuitable for learners from more collectivist cultures. This is because the need for conformity is in conflict with the process of constructive criticism between peers. In Carson and Nelson's (1996, cited in Hyland 2003) study Chinese learners were found to avoid helping each other in a critical way. Hyland (2003: 42) believes that "Although such cultural strategies may encourage a positive group climate and avoid threatening the "face" of its members, they may be less effective in fostering a critical appreciation of texts or developing writing skills." While it may be less effective in perfecting the final product of the writing class, it seems that it may be effective in increasing students' confidence about

their writing ability and/or developing a positive classroom atmosphere. Therefore, peer response may still be a worthwhile activity.

Apart from feedback, teachers also invariably give students grades on their papers. There has been disagreement as to whether the grades have any positive effect, in terms of motivation or negative effect, in terms of damaging student confidence (Goldstein, 2006).

Research Method

Participants

The participants of the present study were 72 students in three different second-year writing classes in the English department of Kanda University of International Studies. The three classes had two different teachers and met twice a week for 90 minutes. Students in the English department are streamed into four ability tiers, tier one being the highest level and tier four being the lowest. The students in this study were in tier two (1 class) and tier four (2 classes). Their English proficiency could be described as ranging from intermediate to advanced level.

Questionnaire

Some data was collected through five questions on a questionnaire which the students answered at the time of submitting each essay. The first question was “How many drafts of this essay did you write (Including this final draft)?” A five point Likert scale was used with the answers 1 to 5. The second question was “How many times did you do self review of this essay?” The third question was “How many

times did you receive peer feedback on this essay?” The fourth question was “How many times did you receive teacher feedback on this essay?” A five point Likert scale was used for questions two to four with the answers 0 to 4. The final question was “Overall, how good do you think this essay is?” A six point Likert scale was used with the answers: Terrible, Poor, Not so good, Good, Very good, Excellent. The answers to this final question were taken as the students’ confidence in that piece of writing.

Assignments

In addition to the questionnaire data, information was collected from the teachers. The information collected from the teachers included the grades students had received on the previous assignment. The assignment directly after the summer vacation was excluded from the study because it was judged that a grade given in July could not be considered to affect a student’s confidence in their writing in October. All grades were input on a scale of 0 to 1. In addition to this, the teachers gave word counts for each assignment and information about which tier the class was. While only 72 students were included in the study, each student wrote multiple assignments over the duration of the course. Only those assignments about which data relating to every variable could be collected were included in the study. The total number of assignments included in the study was 197.

Analysis

Multiple regression was employed with the students’ confidence levels as the dependent variable and the number of drafts, essay number, amount of self review,

amount of peer feedback, amount of teacher feedback, ability tier, grade on the previous assignment and word count as the independent variables. Multiple regression measures the extent to which increases in each independent variable can predict increases in the dependent variable. If, for example, it is found that the number of drafts predicts student confidence, that would mean that the more drafts students write the more confident they feel about their final draft. This would also suggest that one way of helping our students to feel more confident about their writing skills would be to require them to write more drafts of each assignment. The tier was included in the analysis in order to ascertain whether students' confidence in writing was predicted by their English language ability. The assignment number was included in the analysis to see whether the students became more confident as the course progressed.

Results and discussion

The descriptive statistics can be seen in table 1.

TABLE 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	N
Confidence	3.56	0.991	197
Drafts	3.48	0.861	197
Self review	3.10	0.898	197
Peer feedback	1.81	0.835	197
Teacher feedback	0.97	0.950	197
Last grade	0.81	0.111	197
Word count	458.70	127.544	197

Students' levels of confidence ranged from one to five. No student reported that they believed their final draft to be excellent. As students are working in a foreign language and writing fairly long academic essays, this is not surprising. Especially when taking into consideration the Japanese cultural tendency for humbleness.

The number of drafts ranged from two to five. The questions regarding the number of times self review, peer feedback and teacher feedback were carried out all resulted in a full range of answers; from zero to four. The shortest essay was 105 words in length and the longest was 869 words. The grades on the previous assignment ranged from 0.26 to 1.00. The average grade of 0.81 represents a letter grade of A and this reflects the tendency for students to achieve high grades in this programme of study.

Multiple regression was employed to ascertain which of the independent variables predict changes in students' level of confidence in their writing. The results of the multiple regression can be seen in table 2.

The R squared value of 0.365 is very low. This shows that less than half of the variance in student confidence is accounted for by these variables. This is not surprising as confidence is strongly connected to personality and it is to be expected that those students who have high self confidence in general will also feel more confident in each assignment they submit than those who have lower self confidence regardless of variations in the writing process.

There were positive relationships between the independent variables for self

TABLE 2. *Multiple regression*

Variable	B	Std. error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	2.174	0.696		3.124	0.002
Drafts	-0.013	0.105	-0.011	-0.121	0.904
Essay number	-0.002	0.048	-0.004	-0.042	0.966
Self review	0.123	0.085	0.111	1.450	0.149
Peer feedback	0.267	0.087	0.225	3.056	0.003*
Teacher feedback	0.130	0.083	0.125	1.563	0.120
Tier	-0.114	0.070	-0.115	-1.631	0.105
Word count	-0.001	0.001	-0.074	-0.924	0.357
Last grade	1.152	0.684	0.129	1.685	0.094

R² = .365

Dependent Variable: Confidence

* Significant at the 0.05 level.

review, peer feedback, teacher feedback and last grade and student confidence in their final draft. However, only the peer feedback variable was significantly predictive of student confidence. It can be seen that there is a tendency for students to feel more confident about assignments on which they carried out more self review and less confident about assignments on which they carried out less self review. There is also a tendency for students to feel more confident about assignments on which they receive more teacher feedback than about those on which they receive less teacher feedback. Furthermore, there is a tendency for students to feel more confident about their final draft when they received a higher grade on their previous assignment and less confident when they received a lower grade. The one significant predictor of student confidence in writing is peer

feedback. The more peer feedback a student gave and received on an assignment, the more confident they felt about the final draft.

Because there were only students from two instructors' classes involved in this research, it was considered necessary to conduct an independent samples *t* test to check whether the instructor had any significant impact on student confidence levels. The independent samples *t* test showed that there was no significant difference between the confidence levels of students from the classes of the two different instructors: $t(195) = 0.296, p = 0.767$.

Conclusion

It is clear that confidence is fundamentally tied to one's personality and regardless of the teaching practices we employ we will never be able to ensure that all of our students feel satisfied about their language ability all the time. It is quite natural that each person is unique in the extent to which they can feel confident about the things they do. On the other hand, trying to increase our students' confidence in their language ability is one important role that language educators need to take into consideration when making decisions about classroom practices.

Students from only two ability tiers were included in this study. It would certainly be worthwhile to compare the confidence levels of students in more tiers in the future. In addition to this, if students in a programme which gave a wider range of grades were included in a study such as this one, more could be found out about the effect of grades on student confidence.

All three forms of feedback included as variables in the study had a positive relationship with student confidence. When students reviewed their own writing more, they tended to have higher confidence in their final draft. When students received more teacher feedback, they also tended to feel more confident about their final draft. However, peer feedback was the only one of the eight independent variables that significantly predicted student confidence levels. There are various possible reasons for this which will be outlined below.

One factor might be the tendency for Japanese students to deal with each other in a polite way in order to save face. While teachers also often give constructive and positive feedback together, due to time constraints, their positive feedback is likely to be stressed less than that of students when they give peer feedback. Another possible reason is that being able to give feedback may increase students' critical thinking skills and may therefore not only increase their confidence in their writing ability but also their actual writing ability as is claimed by Lundstrom and Baker (2009).

In addition to this, it may be the reading of peers' essays that increased students' confidence in their own writing. Students tend to have unrealistic models as their targets. Many students, for example, state that they want to be able to speak like a native speaker. It is also natural that teachers use the final drafts of the most successful student essays as the example essays when teaching writing. In reading not only drafts of students at the same ability level but also preliminary drafts when giving peer review, students may develop a more realistic understanding of what they should be aiming for and therefore may be less likely

to fall short. If students don't have the chance to read their peers' drafts, they may continue imagining that all their peers' drafts resemble the example essay handed out by the teacher.

Although the main role of language educators is to increase students' language ability, there are many factors that can influence ability. It is important to keep student confidence in mind as students that are more confident are also more motivated and increased motivation is one factor leading to increased ability. In addition to this, clearly the final outcome of English language education should not be ghosts that roam around speaking and writing in perfectly fluent English. Rather, it should be to develop students into well-rounded people and an essential component of well-roundedness is self-confidence. The finding that peer feedback predicts higher levels of confidence suggests that peer feedback should be considered to be an indispensable part of the writing curriculum.

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